



Building Partnerships

By Bob Bendick,
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Photo by Bruce Springer

Editor's Note: The following excerpts, from a presentation by Bob Bendick at the 2004 Southern Group of State Foresters' meeting, portray a sense of urgency and need for cooperation among all landowners, leaders, and landscape planners. How will the rapidly changing Southern landscape affect our future? How should leaders of the forestry community respond to these changes? These are important issues, and your input is critical. Even if you do not agree with Mr. Bendick's proposals, hopefully you will gain a better understanding of the issues at hand. How would you respond?

I am here today to explore with you the possibilities for non-profit conservation groups and other interests to work more closely with State Foresters to meet the almost unprecedented threats and challenges now facing the forests of the South.

I have great respect for State Foresters and for state forestry agencies and their staffs. Before coming to the Conservancy in Florida 8.5 years ago, I was a natural resource and environmental manager in state government for 18 years.

I am sure most of you have had some contact with The Nature Conservancy, but here's just a brief update as context for the rest of my talk. The Conservancy was founded more than 50 years ago to protect habitat for the diversity of plants and animals. I have heard a story recently that one of the key events that inspired the Conservancy's founders was the disappearance of the ivory-billed woodpecker here in the South as a result of the loss of too much of its primary habitat.

Today the Conservancy has chapters in 50 states and programs in 27 countries.

It is known for buying land to protect habitat either for our own preserves or in partnership with government. We also acquire conservation easements by donation and purchase. We have conserved millions of acres through acquisition in this country and many millions more around the world through a variety of techniques.

Managing our own lands (the largest system of private nature preserve on Earth) has given us both important on-the-ground, practical natural resource experience and deep roots in many com-

munities. In recent years we have grown from these roots to think much more about conserving not just pieces of land where rare species are located, but whole functioning landscapes including both land and water.

Landscape scale conservation requires significant long-term investment by us, and, by public and private landowners, and so to better direct where we invest our time and money, we have developed a conservation planning approach that uses what we call eco-regional planning to identify the most biologically important areas for conservation. We now work on marine and freshwater issues, on land management including fire and invasive species and pathogens, on landowner incentives, cooperative forest management, and in some places on land use planning.

The findings of the Southern Forest Resource Assessment, along with our own observations in the field, gave us a sense of a dramatic acceleration of change in southern forests. Working with other organizations like the Southern Environmental Law Center and Environmental Defense, we used this analysis to define what we thought were the most critical threats. *[See sidebar.]*

In response to these threats, we identified some overall forest conservation strategies that made sense to us in guiding our work:

- Planning by public agencies and private landowners to identify which forestlands are best suited for which purposes.
- Creating more and better funded incentives for management of private non-industrial lands including finding ways to compensate private landowners for the benefits to society their forestlands provide, such as carbon mitigation and watershed and habitat protection.
- Raising public conservation capital for acquisition in fee or easement of the forestlands most significant for outdoor recreation, biodiversity protection, and protection of water resources.
- Mobilizing private capital for the purchase of land for long-term forest management, often in conjunction with public conservation dollars.
- Using several approaches to addressing altered hydrology, particularly for bottomland sites.

- Creating more forest management partnerships and networks like the Gulf Coastal Plain Eco-system Partnership, which involves ten landowners in the Florida panhandle who together manage more than a million acres.
- Encouraging cooperative fire planning and management particularly to restore more natural fire regimes while at the

Threats to Our Forests

- Fragmentation of forests from the sale and subdivision of land, road building, and development. The widespread and rapid divestiture of large amounts of forestland by industrial forest landowners is accelerating this process.
- The conversion of forestland to urban land uses (estimated by the SFRA at a million acres a year)
- A lack of funding to support technical advice and other incentives to assist the private, non-industrial landowners who control the great majority of land in the South with planning and management
- Altered hydrology in bottomland hardwood systems
- Fire exclusion, particularly in long-leaf and oak/pine systems
- Inappropriate forest practices in some areas
- An increasing lack of contact with and understanding of forests by the people of the South
- The loss of forest industry to other places in the world
- Invasion of our region by new waves of exotic pathogens, pests, and plant species

same time reducing hazards to people and communities.

- Increasing public awareness of forest issues.

We then joined with other groups including Environmental Defense, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Southern Environmental Law Center to further discuss these strategies as a first step in engaging in discussions with

many more stakeholders. The National Wildlife Federation was important to help relate to the many hunting and fishing groups that have traditionally been so important to conservation in the South.

As in the case of so many things, we realized that implementing forest conservation strategies comes down to money. And since the state governments in the South don't have much money and non-profits have even less, we thought about Federal programs, and recognized what many others have said, that over the years the South has gotten shortchanged in federal funding for its forests with much more attention having gone to other parts of the country.

After discussion with people and groups who we felt might have other perceptions from ours — industry representatives, groups representing small landowners such as the American Forest Foundation; the USDA Forest Service; your chair, Bob Schowalter, and some other state foresters, we figured that the most useful thing to do was to look at federal programs already on the books, but that had no or insufficient funding, to see if we could work with many other partners to build a coalition in support of funding these programs in a way that would better protect the multiple values of Southern forests.

So I am here to talk to you, the leaders of forestry in the South, on behalf of our partner organizations, about seeking common ground with a broad range of interests in supporting expanded funding for several existing federal forestry programs that can help address the threats facing Southern forests in a rapidly changing world. I will detail those programs in a minute, but my experience suggests that building coalitions means first agreeing or, at least discussing, principles that can create the foundation for further progress. So here are the principles that I'd suggest underlay our proposals:

(1) Conservation groups recognize that we represent only some of many stakeholders; that we must find common ground with others if we are all to address the rapid change now facing the forests of the South. State forestry agencies play a central role in every aspect of forest conservation and management.

(2) We should have a broad, long term vision for the future of our forests and

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Black Ducks

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reaches of the flyway. The little ponds are precisely a mile and a half from nowhere and a few hundred yards beyond that. In other words, I like to think they are mine alone, a jeweled necklace of water, deep in a seamless tract of hardwood hills where sometimes the ducks come hard at angles down through a tangle of beech and ash at deceptive speed. Sometimes they hang suspended at gun range above bare and powerful oak arms that pierce a blue curtain of January sky. Sometimes they don't come at all.

Successful or not, I cannot remember "a good walk wasted" in Black Duck country. The solitude and quiet of the piedmont hills is broken only by the

reedy calls and chatter of heavy dark ducks at first light. Much later, the low rumble of GM&O freight moving somewhere in the distant Coosa Valley reminds me of the long haul out to Anderson Bluff. I retrace my steps and move around the blackberry and greenbrier thicket that I waded through in early black robed confusion. Last month's autumn color lays in heaps on the forest floor and sounds like piles of cornflakes assaulted by heavy boots. Chickadees, juncos, and flickers escort me upslope as a gray squirrel barks General Forrest's orders for me to press on. But I stop . . . a last drink of cold winter air.

Once more, the woods are still. ☿

References

*Clemson levelers and wood duck nest boxes can be obtained through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service program: **Partners in Wildlife**.*

*For more extensive information refer to: **Managing Wildlife**, Alabama Wildlife Federation, Greg and Deborah Yarrow, 1999, or **Managing Beaver to Benefit Waterfowl** 13.4.7, James Ringelman, Colorado Division of Wildlife, 1991.*

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that vision should respect both their economic and their ecological viability.

(3) In the more than 200,000,000 acres of Southern forestland there is enough space to meet many objectives to protect multiple forest values. Intensive forestry, protected areas, and the diverse forest management approaches of non-industrial owners all have their places. There is no need to pit conservation against production forestry. Conserved areas function most effectively in a larger forested landscape. Keeping forests as forests should be our underlying and unifying goal.

(4) We should think long term — 50 years or more — if we are to protect the values of Southern forests.

(5) We should think about conservation strategies and incentives at a landscape scale if we expect forests to survive over that long term.

(6) We must respect the equity of landowners and the values of communities in developing improved forestry programs.

So with these threats, strategies, and principles in mind, our groups are respectfully proposing the following short-term agenda for action on several important federal forestry programs. As I noted earlier, we recognize that the state foresters and others are more important players than we are, but we hope to cre-

ate a coalition that is more effective than any of us working on our own.

•**The Forest Land Enhancement Program (FLEP)**, can be effective because it works through your agencies, is the only Farm Bill Program specifically directed toward the tens of millions of acres of privately owned forestland, and is desperately needed

to assist the growing number of non-industrial private landowners in managing their land for multiple purposes.

•**The Forest Stewardship Program** is critical to supporting sound forest management by the 5.5 million landowners who own 89 % of the forestland in the South. [We should

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Photo by Bruce Springer

continue to promote funding for the Stewardship Program.]

- **Forest Legacy** is also a partnership with states in this case in acquiring easements or land outright. [Forest] Legacy is particularly important at this time when millions of acres are for sale in the South. Legacy easements can be used in tandem with private capital to support long-term forest management and maintaining working forests. The land sales now going on are an opportunity that will not come around again.

- The South is clearly facing a growing number of insect pests and pathogens like hemlock wooly adelgid, sudden oak death, and emerald ash borer. We urge funding of the **Forest Health Management** Budget of the Forest Service and implementation of more comprehensive long-term monitoring and management programs in partnerships with the states.

- **The Land and Water Conservation Fund** should receive some reasonable level of support to pay for additions and inholdings to National Forests and Wildlife Refuges. The vast majority of land in the South will always be in private hands, but the region faces growing recreational needs for its expanding urban populations and growing threats to its exceptional biodiversity. As in the case of Forest Legacy, we now have a once in a lifetime opportunity to acquire land long sought after to round out existing federal forest tracts.

- Bottomland hardwoods and other forested wetlands occupy less than 20% of their original range. The **Wetland Reserve Program** provides funding for the protection and restoration of bottomland hardwoods, farmed wetland, riparian corridors, and other wetland areas.

- The **Healthy Forest Restoration Act** passed earlier this year is designed to provide financial, technical, and education assistance for forestry practices to protect, manage, and restore water quality on non-federal forested and potentially forested lands.

The Act [also] intended to support management agreements and the acquisition of easements to create partnerships between the NRCS [Natural

Resources Conservation Service] and private landowners to protect critical habitat for important and threatened species. This program is well suited for longleaf pine, and we suggest that the [amounts] authorized in the Act be appropriated to support several pilot projects.

- We support **National Fire Plan Implementation** with more attention to Southern forests.

Not part of this short-term agenda, but something requiring longer-term attention, is the need for incentives to retain forest-based industry in the South. As you know, without healthy wood markets, we will damage the ability of landowners to manage and retain their holdings over the long term and that will further accelerate the loss of forestland through fragmentation and development.

I fully realize that not everyone is likely to support each one of these proposals equally, and my conservation group colleagues and I recognize that some may think it presumptuous for us to even put forward this kind of agenda. But we do so with a sense of humility. We do so in the spirit of trying to create a constructive dialogue among groups that may not have talked together or worked together effectively before. We do so in the hope of finding common ground among those deeply interested in the future of Southern forests at a time when those forests face unprecedented and threaten-

ing change. We do so in the hope that such change also offers new opportunities for shaping the future and that by working together we can get the attention of Washington and our state capitals in a way that will make a lasting difference to our Southern forest heritage. ☸

For current information on the Southern Pine Beetle situation in Alabama, visit the Alabama Forestry Commission web page at: www.forestry.state.al.us

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